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CHRISTMAS WEEK AT BIGLER'S MILL

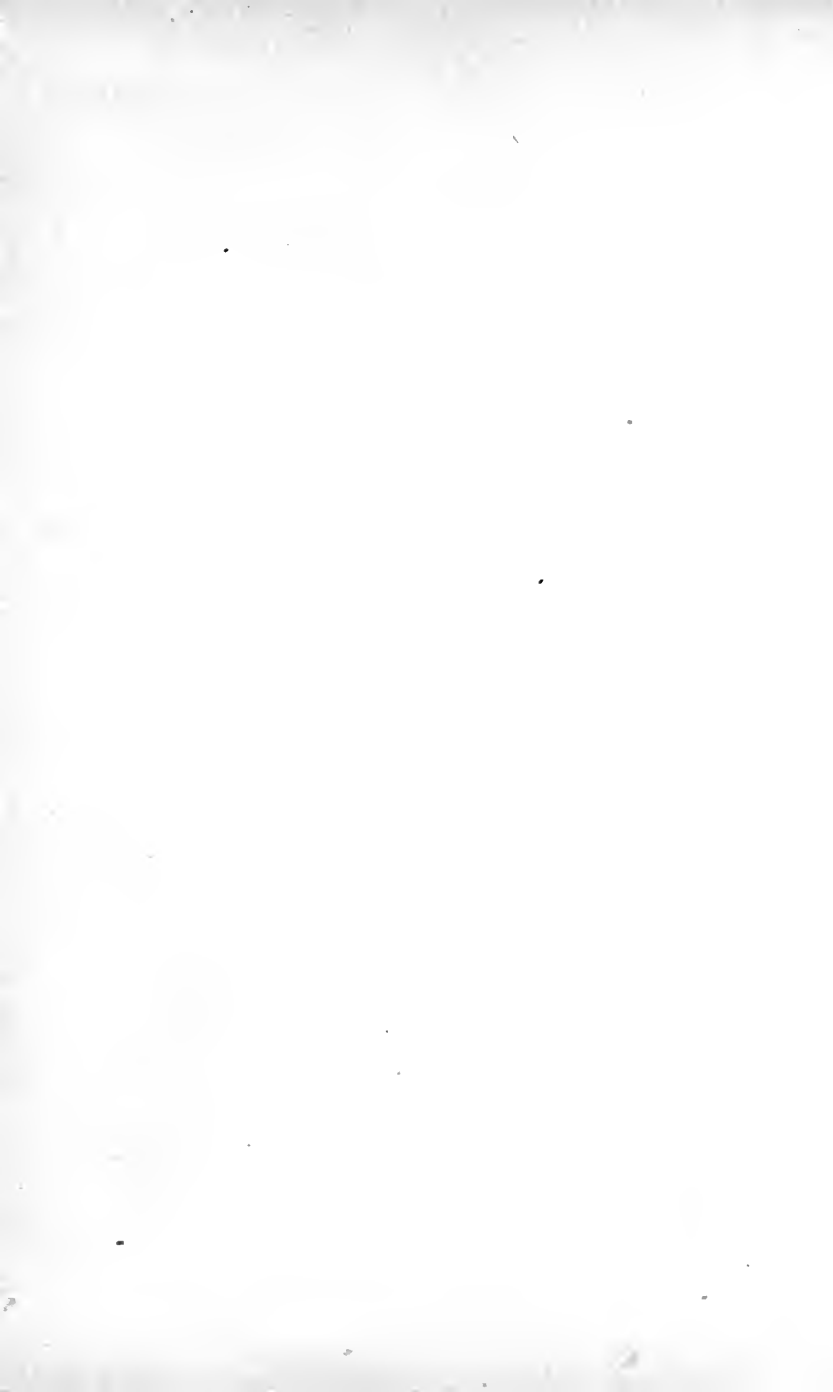


A STORY
IN
BLACK AND WHITE



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LOS ANGELES









"A tidy cabin, also whitewashed."

CHRISTMAS WEEK AT BIGLER'S MILL

A Sketch in Black and White

BY

DORA E. W. SPRATT

Author of "Through the Bush," "Married Life," etc.



PHILADELPHIA

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NOTE

Down in the country districts of old Virginia the people celebrate, not only Christmas day, but all Christmas week. No one works who can avoid doing so. Visits are exchanged; family ties renewed; and weddings are frequent. The "good times" which have been all the year "coming," arrive on Christmas week.

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CHRISTMAS WEEK AT BIGLER'S MILL

CHAPTER I

GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS

"**T**HAT buckin' ole stump thinks he's going to get away from us yet," exclaimed Ned, as he and his sister, Lize Jane, and Cousin Si, saw the crooked old sassafras stump, at which they had been working for an hour, roll down into the ditch at the side of the road. "Pshaw, you all ain't going to give it up?" exclaimed the plucky little fellow, who thought he saw signs of discouragement on the faces of the two older children.

The lane, where they stood, was thickly bordered with bushes and underbrush, to which here and there still clung a dried leaf or last year's sumac bob. In the roadway stood a forlorn old mule hitched to a rough cart, nearly filled with sassafras stumps and roots, which had been unearthed by the hard work of these three grand-

children of "Uncle Simon Dee." No other colored man in the neighborhood of Bigler's Mill was as well known or as much respected as Uncle Simon. His painstaking industry had been transmitted even to the third generation. It revealed itself in the pluck and energy which had been displayed by his grandchildren during the days spent in pulling and grubbing for their Christmas money.

Over by the station, some six miles away, there was a man who bought sassafras, and the most wonderful thing about it was that he paid for it in cash. As soon as the children heard that interesting bit of news they began to dream dreams of buying some special treat for grandfather and grandmother. They might well work hard, for those good people had worked many days for them. Si was the son of their eldest daughter. Both of his parents were dead, but he scarcely knew what it was to be orphaned since he had his grandparents. Ned and Lize Jane, although fatherless, had a mother, who was serving in the North as cook and earning money to help her parents support her boy and girl.

"Come, let's try again," said Ned, as he tumbled

pell-mell down the bank and grasped one of the horn-like roots of the refractory stump. In a short time, by wonderful pushing, bracing, and pulling they managed to roll it into the road just behind the cart. Then their trouble began once more, for they were not strong enough to lift it bodily into the cart, as they were trying to do.

"No use," declared Si, "we uns can't do that. 'Sides we's all clean dead tired." Si was the oldest and the strongest. When he gave up it would seem as though their past efforts were lost. Even ten-years-old Ned shook his head doubtfully.

"Let's ask the Lord to help us," said Lize Jane, earnestly. Her brother and cousin did not laugh, as many white boys might have done. Their good old grandfather had taught them by precept and example to go and tell Jesus whenever they were in need. The three children knelt; their heads were bowed, their dark eyes closed, while Lize Jane prayed :

"Dear Lord, we know you've been watching us aworkin', and we've tried to do the best we could, but we can't do more without your help. Please help us right away. Amen."

"And, O Lord," added Ned, "we're a doing it

for grandfather and grandmother." He paused for an instant, then added, "and for Christmas," for he thought that might have more weight with the Christ of Christmas day.

There was silence a moment as the three children knelt on the lonely road under the December



sky. The mule flung his head around to see what they were doing. A squirrel ran along the rail fence, then, because everything was so quiet, he stopped on an old stump to crack a nut. Then Si prayed, "Our Father who art in heaven, if you hasn't time to bother with us all, please jus' tell us what to do our own selves.

Amen." Then the others said "Amen" again, as it seemed the proper thing to do.

Springing to his feet Si saw the squirrel, and his first thought was, "That bun would make a nice stew for grandmother." While he was looking for a stone the squirrel seemed to realize that the position of the children was no longer devotional, but aggressive, so he waved his plume in

a speedy farewell, then disappeared behind the bushes. Usually Si would have followed him and sought for his nest, but a glance at the old rail fence had given the boy an inspiring thought.

"Now I know what to do," he exclaimed, as he sprang across the road and lifted one end of the topmost rail. Lize Jane and Ned went to his aid, although they did not understand what he wished to do. When three of the long rails were leaning upon the back end of the cart they realized that they had been building an incline for the unruly stump to ascend. Even then it was no easy matter to roll the ungainly thing, but at last the deed was done, and the gnarly root reposed on the top of the pile.

"Boys," said Lize Jane, thoughtfully, "you know grandfather says we mustn't forget to thank the Lord when he hears our prayers."

Once again the trio knelt down while Lize Jane said reverently, "Thank you, dear Jesus, for telling us what to do ourselves." "Amen!" responded both the boys, then wasted no time in climbing into the cart, for they had to drive several miles before they could sell their sassafras.

"G'long," cried Si, swinging his stick. The

old mule started off at a rattling pace, as if, for once, he had stood long enough. Lize Jane watched them a moment, then turned and went in the opposite direction, for she knew the boys would not need her help, while her grandmother might. Her hair and complexion, which was the color of a ripe chestnut, gave the impression that she was a full-blooded Negro; but her figure and features betrayed the strange mingling of different races. African, English, and American Indian were blended in the body, mind, and soul of this humble colored girl. How strange is humanity.

The road led past a strip of whitewashed fence, which enclosed a tidy cabin, also whitewashed. At either end was a huge stone chimney, like a great anchor fore and aft. Two front doors revealed the fact that the cabin could boast a "parlor."

In the door of the living room stood a tall, intelligent-looking colored woman, upon whose face time had left his mark, although he had not thus far managed to bend her proud form. Her air of stoical pride was explained if once you heard her say: "My father was an Indian. He was stolen when a babe, and sold into slavery, but as soon as

he was a man he ran away and went back to his people. He wanted my mother to take me and go with him, but she was only a young thing then and she was afraid to try it." 'This and much more she told, in her own way, to her grandchildren, who were proud of grandmother, from the top of her gay turban to the toe of her number eight shoe.

Lize Jane was welcomed by a few noisy hens,—the last of the flock,—reserved for Christmas week, when every one must live well, even though he may fast at other times.

"Come, Lize Jane, you's mighty mod'rate, 'pears to me. I's waitin' for you to read your Unc' Bob's letter."

"Oh, gran'mother, is he comin' home for Christmas?" cried the girl, forgetting, for the moment, that the old woman could not read.

"Land sakes, chile, how's I to know. I jus' wisht I didn't have to wait your slow motions to get my letters read. If I'd had the chance to learn to read, likely I'd of got more learnin' than any o' you."

Lize Jane did not doubt this statement in the least. Even Miss Amanda Carter, up at the "Big

House," had said once in her hearing, "Uncle Simon Dee's wife is one of the most capable colored women in this county."

Seizing the open letter her eye ran hastily down the page. "Jus' listen here!" she cried, although her grandmother was doing nothing else:

"DEAR MOTHER:

"I has been awful sick down here, and I would of died if it hadn't been for Nancy Sisson. She took such good care of me that she saved my life, the doctor said. So I married her, and I's going to bring her home. Yours truly, your son,
BOB."

"There, I al'ays said Bob 'ud git sick away down in New O'leans. I's mighty glad he's coming home."

"But just think, gran'mother," said Lize Jane, in dismay, "he's got a woman to bring home with him. Where on earth will we put 'em when they get here?"

"'Pears like we'll have to let 'em sleep in the parlor for a while," said the old woman, reflectively. Lize Jane's face fell and her eyes filled with tears, for that parlor was her joy and delight. It was her dreaming place, where she shut herself in with her books and imagined she was the

heroine. It was her prayer-closet where in her childish way she told the Great Father all her little troubles, her petty hopes, her struggling ambitions. There was yet another reason why that small room, with its bare floor and braided rugs, with its huge, rough fireplace and rudely papered walls, with its four-posted bed and patchwork quilt, with the glass vase and plaster ornaments on the fireplace shelf, and all that gave the room its individuality, was so highly prized. This last was a decidedly human—Lize Jane's good grandfather might have said sinful—reason; but the girl could not help glorying in the fact that her folks were a long notch above their colored neighbors, who had no parlor, but entertained company in the same room where they cooked, ate, and slept.

As she thought of all that room was to her she cried, emphatically: "That's my mamma's own bed, and Bob sha'n't have it for his low-down field hand."

Her grandmother was astonished at Lize Jane's passionate outburst, for the child usually tried, as the old woman expressed it, "to act like a Christian." The girl rushed into the parlor and knelt down by the bed for a good cry. She thought of

Unc' Bob, her stanch friend and confidant ever since her mamma went North. Now he was married and would not care for her any more. At this thought the tears burst forth anew.

"I 'most wish he had died 'stead of gettin' well and marryin' her," she cried, then stopped suddenly, shocked at her own wickedness.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

WHEN Si and Ned returned from the railway station they gleefully exhibited sixty-eight cents in "true-as-you-live money," which the man had paid for the roots and stumps of sassafras. Ned danced a double shuffle out in the lean-to, while Lize Jane and Si sat on the doorstep with their heads close together, and talked of what the money would buy.

"Jus' one more day 'fore Christmas," shouted Ned, as the three went into the house to ask their grandmother if they might go down to the store bright and early the following day.

"Do it take you all to spend a cent?" she asked, at the same time wondering where the "cent" came from; for money was a curiosity in that neighborhood, where nearly everything was bought, sold, and paid for by barter.

The next morning, when they started for the store, there was quite a discussion as to which one should carry the money. Lize Jane had a quar-

ter, which she had earned by crocheting edging for a lady up North. The boys recognized her right to carry that, but declared she should not carry all the cash. At length they divided as evenly as convenient, and each one walked with the proud air of a capitalist. What odds if the boys were barefoot, and Lize Jane's buttoned boots had been well worn in the North before she had the chance to tuck her brown toes within them? They had money in their pockets—what might they not possess?

But even the jingling cash or the brightly shining sun did not keep the bare feet from feeling the snap in the air, so the two boys began to skip and jump to keep warm.

"I wonder what mammy'll send in the Christmas box from the North?" cried Ned, as he held up one foot and hopped on the other. Over and over again these three had guessed what the contents of the wonderful box would be. The people with whom their mother lived, had contributed largely to the contents, so that the great event of Christmas week, to Simon Dee's household was the arrival of the box from the North.

"I'd like to get some shoes," said Si, as his eyes wandered over the brown corn-fields, where the crows were cawing in remembrance of past comforts.

"Yes, 'cause when we've only one pair, grandmother is always sayin', 'Oh, you has to save them fo' Sunday,'" replied Ned, then started full tilt after a rabbit.

"Sick him dorg," cried Si, as he and Lize Jane both joined in the chase. A yellowish coon-dog dashed across the road and started in hot pursuit after "ole br'er rabbit." Lize Jane thought of her shoes and stopped on the edge of the field, where the corn stubble would have proved poor polishers to her best and only pair. She watched the boys and dog wistfully and decided to take off her shoes, when she saw the rabbit turn in its tracks. Soon all were speeding toward her. Instinctively she seized a stone and flung it at the bunny. Of course it was a happen-so, for a girl cannot throw a stone, but the rabbit was struck on



its right hopper, with force enough to break its leg. The poor little cotton-tail could not go far in that plight, so the dog soon caught it and shook the life out of it.

"Good for you, Lize Jane," cried Si as he took the rabbit from the dog. "Hi! He's a beauty!" he exclaimed as he held the bunny up by its ears.

Just then they heard the sound of wheels, as a horse and carriage crossed the bridge at the mill. They hurried on, hoping to reach the mill in time to see a wagon-load of grain landed, but the sound of the wheels grew louder and they saw it was Lawyer Gray and his circus horse. This particular piebald nag had indeed once proudly performed under the canvas, but the small circus troupe with which it traveled had come to want. When they sold out Lawyer Gray bought "Ginger."

The lawyer was studying over some knotty case, so he gave but an absent-minded nod as he passed the group of colored children. When a rod or two past he suddenly reined in his steed, as he turned his head and called, "Hello, Si!" whereat the three ran back to see what he wanted.

"Si, do you want to earn a quarter for Christmas money?" inquired Lawyer Gray.

"A quarter, sir, what doin'?" said the boy, hardly believing his ears. If the gentleman had said "a bushel of corn" he would have known that a day's work of some kind or other was wanted. But pay in cash called for unusual work.

"Jump in," replied the lawyer, "I will tell you what I want you to do while we are riding along. Yes, bring the rabbit. We can leave it at your house as we go by. Never mind the dog. Let him come too." For Si was trying to make his dog go on with Ned and Lize Jane, who walked on toward the mill, wondering much what kind of work Lawyer Gray had for Si to do.

"Let's stop at the mill," pleaded Ned; but Lize Jane felt the weighty responsibility of having her cousin's, as well as her own, money to spend, so she gravely declared against the suggestion. They soon found themselves at the post-office, country store, and unlicensed saloon combined. The stock consisted of alcohol and axes, bombazine and beans, calico and coffee, and so on down through the whole alphabetical assortment of a Virginia country store.

Josh Bigler, one of the half-dozen loafers seated

around the stove, was the proprietor, but no one would have known it from any effort on his part to make a trade. The children had plenty of time to look at everything in the dingy glass case before Mr. Bigler arose from his chair, walked slowly behind the counter, still continuing his remarks to the men, then at last remembered to ask, "Do yo young 'uns want anything?"

"How much money is it for a pound of tea?" asked Lize Jane, with strong accent on the word money. Of course they took the cheapest with little regard to quality, but when it came to choosing the Sunday suspenders for their grandfather it took them some time to decide. Mr. Bigler sat down in his chair and gave them plenty of time to consider. At last the shopping was finished, because the money was all spent.

On the homeward walk, Lize Jane did not succeed in coaxing Ned to pass the mill without stopping, for the old mill, a fascinating place to any child, was especially attractive to Ned. He had always been known as "grandfather's miller boy" since his baby days, when he used to rub the meal between his brown thumb and finger to see if it was fine enough.

Lize Jane hid the Christmas presents under the covers of the parlor bed, then offered to help her grandmother with the baking for to-morrow's dinner.

"Dear me," said the girl as she surveyed the material at hand, "I's mighty tired o' cornmeal. I just wisht we had some good white flour, then we could make something worth while."

"Here, you," cried the old woman, turning quickly toward her; "I won't 'low you to put on any o' yo' mother's fine Northern airs. Sweet cornmeal's good 'nuf for any Christian, and a mighty sight too good for a sinner."

CHAPTER III

WIDOW BIGLER'S GEESE

LAWYER GRAY explained to Si, in a few words, the character of the work that he wished him to do. The gentleman had a field of flourishing winter wheat which he had seen cut down to the ground in lines and patches



by those lively lawn mowers, known all through the neighborhood as "Widah Bigler's geese."

When the lawyer arose that morning and looked toward the sloping hillside, where his winter wheat was growing, he saw that the

widow's geese had been working there for an hour or two. The old gander led his followers in a biasing line across the field. One by one the fresh green wheat blades were cut off, then packed away in the crops of the flock. Lawyer Gray dressed in a fidget, ate his breakfast in a fume, then hitched up Ginger in a temper. He drove over to see the widow, and told her he would not endure the ravages of her fowls another day. He told her frankly that her geese were the pest of the neighborhood, a fact too well known to every one except their selfish owner. At last, because of her indifference, he informed her that if she did not keep them shut up he would kill every bird in her flock. It was then the widow's wrath arose, so that she "gave him a piece of her mind," declaring at the close of her philippic, "Samuel Gray, if you dare to touch one of my geese, I'll have the law on you, if you are a lawyer."

"That's all right," he replied, with an ominous shake of his head, which showed that it was all wrong. "I know the law about those matters, and I know how to take care of myself at the same time. I hereby give notice that you must

keep your geese shut up or stand the consequences."

Widow Bigler closed her door with a slam, which said as plainly as words, "I can take care of my own property." She had been threatened before about this matter, but her poorer neighbors endured the destruction of crops, rather than have the expenses of a lawsuit. This time, however, she had one to deal with whose trade was law. This was the knotty case he was considering when he passed Si on the road, and asked him to go with him.

"Now, Si," said Lawyer Gray, as they drove into his yard, "we will unhitch the carriage and roll it into the shed. Then we will strap a blanket on to Ginger." When Si was seated on Ginger's back the lawyer handed him a legal looking document, and told him to tuck it securely into his jacket pocket. This was a formal notice to the widow that her geese were trespassing, as usual.

Si rode off in high glee. To ride on Ginger was almost as good as going to a circus; then too he enjoyed the thought that some one was at last about to bring the Widow Bigler to terms.

The old woman took the folded sheet of legal-cap. She opened it, while she asked the question: "Si, do you know what this is all about?"

"I heard Lawyer Gray say it was a notice about your geese."

"Well, whose agoing ter read his scratches, I'd like to know?" She flung the paper on the table and went on with her work. Si tarried a moment to see whether she had any message. The widow, aware of the fact, looked up from her ironing long enough to say:

"I know what's in that paper well enough without reading it; an' you kin jist tell Samuel Gray that I am used to takin' care of geese."

Si laughed over the funny message, which he repeated word for word to his employer, who was quick to see the insinuation, and was prompt in declaring:

"Yes, all the neighbors have been geese to allow her flock to range early and late, devouring whatever happened to suit their taste. The way she has imposed upon us has been a burning shame. Here's the very last notice she will receive from me."

The paper he handed Si was like the first one,

except that on the outside, written more plainly than was his wont, was this suggestive sentence :

I do hereon declare this to be my third and last trespass notice.

SAMUEL GRAY.

When the widow read this, she exclaimed : "Well, I didn't think he'd give up quick's this. He was so mighty big talkin' when he was here and give his first notice. Si, do you know what the man is drivin' at?"

The boy hardly knew what to reply. His grandfather, as well as all Mrs. Bigler's neighbors for three miles around, had suffered for years from her geese. Still he ventured a word of warning. Said he, "Hadn't you better go right over and get your geese, and shut 'em up?"

"Thank'ee, I know my own business," she replied with a curt nod. "My fowls know enough to come home when they get a good ready."

Ginger never made the two miles on the home stretch in better time. Si made his report. Then the business of the day began. Quietly and systematically the geese were driven from the field into a closed shed. It was no easy job, which Lawyer Gray and Si and "dorg" had undertaken. Dorg had chased coons so often, that he

was almost a sly old coon himself, and his help was invaluable. In fact, after the twenty-eight geese had gabbled their last gabble and hissed their last hiss ; when twenty-eight gray and white feathered bodies lay limp and lifeless upon the floor of the shed, then the lawyer said :

“ Here, Si, is your quarter ; and here is an extra dime for the work your dog did.”

The slaughtered fowls were quickly piled into the back of a wagon, which Ginger was to draw down to the widow's.

“ You can tell her,” said Lawyer Gray, as Si took the reins, “ that I am willing to go to law on this issue, for the law cannot touch me, as she has had her three notices. Tell her that is Virginia law.”

Si did not hurry Ginger any this trip, although he said to himself, “ I'll be glad when this job is over.” As he expected, the wrath of the widow was terrible to see. It increased in power, as one by one he landed the dead geese upon her doorstep. With the last one of the slaughtered fowls, Si delivered Lawyer Gray's message. Then it was she began to realize that she had been outwitted, that she could not have legal

redress. Seating herself on the doorstep, and throwing her apron over her head she began to weep and wail, as though she had lost her own sons and daughters.

The boy could not help feeling sorry for her, even though he knew she richly deserved her punishment. "Whatever am I to do with these poor dead birds?" she moaned. Si thought of his money and offered her his quarter for one of the geese.

"Go 'long," she cried angrily, jerking the covering from her face, "ain't you 'shamed of yourself, makin' fun of a poor, cheated widah. You ain't got a quatah, no-how."

"'Deed I has," cried Si, proudly; whereat the old white woman stopped crying to begin to calculate. "Is that all the money you've got?" she eagerly inquired. Reluctantly Si fished out the dime from the depths of his pocket, and exhibited it, saying, "That's the last cent."

After a moment's study the widow agreed to let the lad have one of the geese for the thirty-five cents, for poultry was cheap and money scarce. However she insisted upon picking the goose before she sold it. "For," said she, "land knows

when I'll git any more feathers, now that my poor feather-bed raisers are dead."

She picked out the smallest and thinnest bird for the colored boy, who exclaimed: "You know Josh Bigler, at the store, won't give you mor'n five cents a pound in trade, so you oughter give me a good ten pounder for all this money."

He held on to his silver with one hand until the legs of a nice-looking bird were placed by the widow in his other hand. Of course the goose was fat, even though smaller than the one he wished to have. There was no reason why any in the flock should be thin, for the fowls had lived on the best of the land, without any cost to their owner.

Said the old woman to herself, as Si drove off, "'Twas a mighty good thing, if that scamp had to kill 'em, that he did it just in time for Christmas week, 'cause now I reckon I kin sell most of 'em."

In the neighborhood of Bigler's Mill there was general rejoicing over the lawyer's solution of the vexed question which had troubled them for years. No doubt the widow would raise another flock of geese, as she had been doing year after

year, but it was the general opinion that hereafter she would be more careful to respect the rights of others.

"Dat was kind o' tough on the widah," said Si's gentle, white-haired grandfather when he heard the tale that evening; but his wife exclaimed, with a grim smile, which reminded one of her Indian blood :

"I 'members the time her ole geese ate up all our garden truck, an' I says she got what was desertful."

CHAPTER IV

THE GEESE NOT ALL DEAD YET

CHRISTMAS morning had not dawned when the Widow Bigler arose that she might finish her preparations for peddling her poultry. Christmas eve—indeed until one o'clock on Christmas morning—she sat up to pick and dress her fowls. Considering all the facts, it was not to be wondered at that the old woman was tired and cross. Her temper burned fiercely against Lawyer Gray who was the direct cause of all her grievances. At each place where she tried to make a sale, she reiterated her complaints.

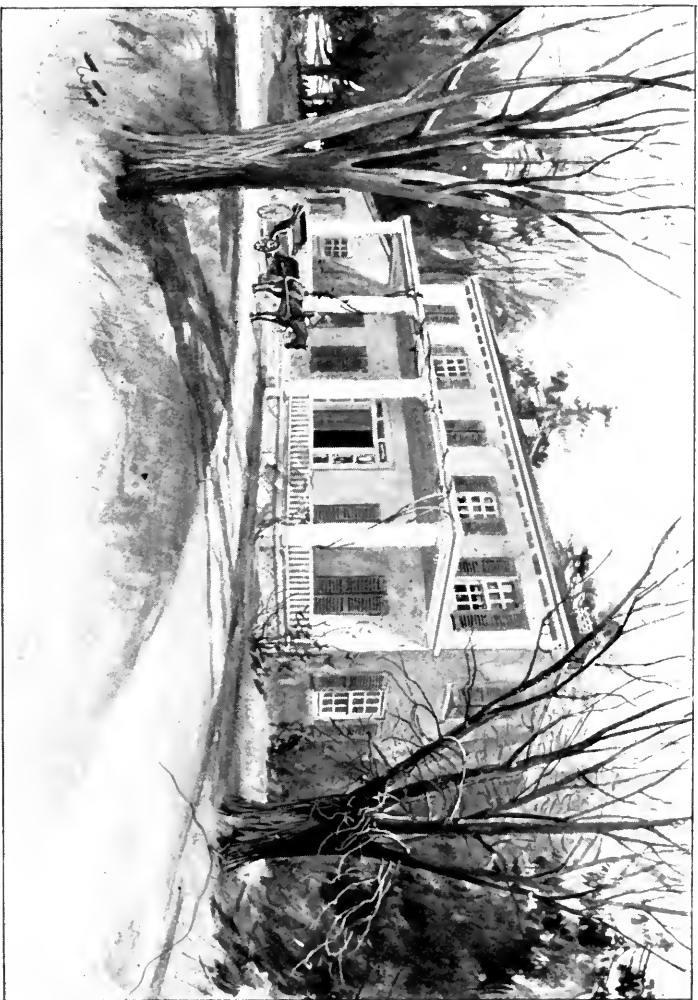
When she reached the "Big House," she found in Miss Amanda Carter a most attentive listener, so the widow enlarged upon each detail of her story. The good lady bought two nice fat geese from the old woman, then went with her to the kitchen, where the fowls were given into the hands of Aunt Becky, the cook.

"Mornin', Miss Mandy," "Christmas gif'," "Christmas gif'," cried the servants, large and

small. Their mistress nodded and smiled, then left the kitchen, to return soon with a basket filled with gifts for each one of the colored people employed about her house and farm. Since Captain Carter's death Miss Amanda had taken entire charge of the property left her by his will. She was a well-developed woman, probably thirty-five years old, with kindly eyes, a firm mouth, a clear, healthful complexion, and a wealth of brown hair. Some thought her a shade too positive, and a trifle too aggressive in her actions, "but then she is Captain Carter's daughter," said the people at Bigler's Mill.

Miss Amanda stepped on the porch, followed closely by the colored people, some of whom had received a remembrance each Christmas since the daughter of the house of Carter was a little child. Her face beamed with good-humor while distributing her gifts. Suddenly her eyes grew stern, and her head was thrown proudly up, "For all de world like old Mars' Carter," whispered Aunt Becky.

"Howd'y, Mars' John," said old Uncle Pete, who stood at the outer edge of the group. The young man whom he saluted passed up the steps



"At the Big House."

and into the house. No one said "Christmas gif'," to him, for they knew that most of them had more of this world's goods than this only son of Captain Carter. Miss Amanda entered the house by another door, for she felt that she could not go through the hollow mockery of wishing her half-brother a Merry Christmas. "He has spoiled my Christmas," she thought, bitterly, and she dwelt upon her troubles as she went about her work.

She was the only daughter and John the only son, but for several years before their death, she had been both son and daughter to her father and his feeble wife, John's mother. She had stood by her father's dying bed, and had heard him say, "I have left everything to you, 'Manda. You have always been true and trusty, while John has disgraced the name of Carter, and broken his mother's heart. He does not deserve anything more of mine."

Miss Amanda recalled the many days of her early womanhood, which she had spent in caring for John's weak and nervous mother. Many beautiful things which might have come into her life she had been obliged, because of her heavy

burden of care, to decline. And now, when her father had been dead nearly a year, and Miss Amanda had been able to adjust herself to the change of affairs, after ten years of dissipation in the city, John had returned to his old home.

About a week before Christmas, John and his girl-wife came back to Bigler's Mill, to find his father and mother both dead, and his sister mistress of affairs. They came, unannounced by letter or message, walked up the broad front steps and into the wide hall, "As if they owned the place," said Miss Amanda. Then the young man informed his sister that he had come home to stay. "Cora, here," said he, with a glance toward his young wife, "rather persisted in her request for me to bring her home to the old place she had heard me talk about. So here we are."

Miss Amanda's heart burned within her as she thought how, when she refused to let her servants bring their one shabby trunk into her house, John picked it up himself, exclaiming, "Oh, I can carry it myself, if that is all. I'll just take it up to my old room. Come on, Cora," he called, when his wife hesitated, and glanced appealingly toward his sister. She was a pale-faced, brown-eyed girl,

evidently not more than seventeen. Miss Amanda's heart was drawn toward the poor child, who had evidently seen hard times since she became a wife, but her brother carried things with such a high hand, that his sister steeled herself against "both the intruders."

John himself was a spoiled child, but Miss Amanda did not intend to continue the work of spoiling. He had been somewhat taken aback by his reception at the "Big House." In his mind he had been going over the last beautiful act in "the Prodigal Son," and had dwelt with peculiar pleasure upon the anticipations of the "fatted calf." The old father was not there to welcome him, and the sister was more inclined to act the part of the elder brother who thought that the prodigal had received his full share of the patrimony.

While talking with the Widow Bigler, Miss Amanda had decided that she would drive over that very day to consult Lawyer Gray about her troubles. If he could so cutely dispose of one kind of trespasser, he was just the one to devise a way to get rid of unwelcome guests according to law.

After she had ordered the stable boy, Jim, to hitch her pony to the phaeton, she was suddenly confronted by the question, "If I go to him, what will Samuel Gray think?" She was provoked at herself to feel an unusual flush as the blushes reddened her cheeks. She shut her lips in a business-like way which expressed her thought, "This is only a matter of law," so she stepped into the phaeton, and grasped the reins.

Years before, Samuel Gray had asked her to be the queen of his home. That was one of the beautiful things which might have been but for the strong call of duty which told her to care for the aged father and invalid stepmother, who clung to her more and more after her boy ran away. "That was ten years ago," thought the lady, with a sigh, "and we are both middle-aged now. Probably he has forgotten his passing fancy and thinks it better to be a bachelor." Then she gave herself a mental jerk, as she reined in her pony. She was at the lawyer's gate.

Lawyer Gray, hearing the sound of wheels, looked out of his window just in time to see Miss Amanda step from her phaeton. Of course he was surprised to see her, but no hint of astonish-

ment was expressed in his courtly welcome, as he ushered the lady into his "spare room." With the quick eye of a trained home-keeper, Miss Amanda saw at a glance that the lawyer and his house needed the deft hand of a capable woman "to fix them up." "His housekeeper certainly has a 'crooked eye,' " thought this woman, whose glance took in the pictures which hung awry, the curtains which were not draped, but twisted, and the general disarrangement of the furniture.

With a laughing reference to Widow Bigler's sad tale, and with some blushes, "Because it is a family matter, you know," Miss Amanda told of her trials and tribulations, and inquired what she could do to get her brother and his wife out of her house.

"Why, just order them out," said Lawyer Gray, as though the thing were already done.

"Well, but where will they go?" questioned the inconsistent lady.

"That is for them, not for you to decide."

"But John always did have his own way at home, you know. He never will go just for my ordering. I used to have to be his lackey when he was a youngster, and he expects me to con-

tinue to act in that capacity." Her dark eyes snapped, her cheeks were rosy. "She never looked better," thought Samuel Gray.

"I will give you my opinion, free of cost," said



the lawyer, with a quizzical expression in his eyes, which she did not understand.

She drew herself proudly erect, as she opened her purse, exclaiming, "Of course I expect to pay you for your advice."

"Yes, yes," he answered, hastily, "if you act upon it I shall expect to be well paid." There was a long pause, during which he seemed to be considering the question.

"Well, what would you advise?" asked the lady, growing impatient.

"Miss Amanda, I think you will have to get a husband, who can order your unwelcome guests off from the premises," he said, with a smile.

"Mr. Gray," she cried, rising hastily to her feet, "you are forgetting to be a gentleman."

"Pardon me, please," he said, stepping quickly to her side, "I did not mean to be rude, I only hoped you had changed your mind since the time when I asked you to marry me years ago."

"Oh, was that what you were aiming at?" she said, a light dawning into her mind, and also in her eyes.

"Yes, I must have gotten at it most awkwardly, but I saw I could be of use to you. I love you even more than I did when I was in my twenties. But then I will not trouble you with that again."

"Go on," said Miss Amanda, hardly knowing what she said. Then Samuel Gray did "go on," and told the old sweet story, which proved more

interesting to those two middle-aged people, than any story they had ever read.

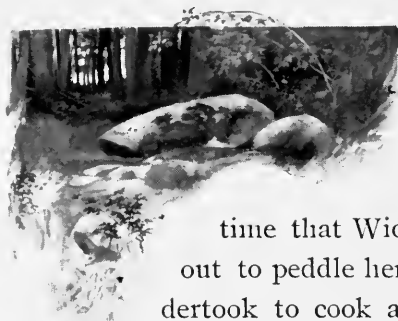
For one who had waited so patiently for ten long years, it was wonderful how impatient he was of farther delay. He wanted Miss Amanda to ride over with him to Preacher Garland's that very day. "The years have been so long," he pleaded, "and since mother died the house has been so lonely. Why do we need to wait any longer?" At last she gave her consent to a quiet wedding at the Big House, on the last day of the year.

"That will be an age to wait," he said, while she laughed, a merry, light-hearted ripple, as she exclaimed, "Why, you impatient boy, it is not quite one week."

Before bedtime the fact of the engagement was neighborhood news. Nearly every one, white and colored, rejoiced with the two whose hearts were so glad. But when the Widow Bigler heard the report, she exclaimed, "Miss Mandy to do such a fool thing as to promise to marry that scamp of a lawyer! Well, the geese ain't all dead yet!"

CHAPTER V

CHRISTMAS DAY AT UNCLE SIMON'S



LIZE JANE, Ned, and Si arose on Christmas morning, about the time that Widow Bigler started out to peddle her geese. They undertook to cook as good a breakfast as they could with the materials at hand. When the eggs were boiling, the sweet potatoes frying, and the fresh spring water bubbling over the fire in the big fireplace, Lize Jane proceeded to make the tea, which was to be the special Christmas treat.

Her grandmother, coming from behind the bed-tick curtains where she had been dressing, did not even stop to say "Christmas gif'," or "Merry Christmas," before she exclaimed, "I smell tea! Mighty good tea too."

"Grandmother, we bought it for your very own Christmas. It's from us children," cried Ned.

When their grandfather made his appearance, a general explanation took place as to what the children had done to earn their money. The good man seated himself at the table where he found the new suspenders under his plate. Lize Jane discovered a pair of blue mittens, while the boys each found a red pair, all of which was the work of grandmother's knitting-needles. Each one at the table had a stick of mint candy, with red streaks winding around, like the lines on a barber's pole.



Grandfather bowed his head, and all listened reverently as he gave thanks.

Dear Lord, we thank you fo' all these gifts. The bestest gif' of all you give this po' world one Christmas day, long time ago. Help us to show our thanksgivin'ness by givin' you ourselves. Here's dear ole mother an' me; we's gettin' ole and gray, but we wants to serve you, Lord, as long as we has bref. Here's Si. Jus' help him to love you better'n he does hisself, then he'll give you the bestest affection of his life. I b'lieve Lize Jane's tryin' to be a chile of your kingdom, O Lord, an' she is ahankerin' after learnin' so's to teach our people to be better. Is that what you want her to do? Please let her know, and make it mighty clear. Then here's Ned. You know jus' what kind of a wigglin' and twistin' boy he is, but he is young yit. Oh, our kind, lovin' Father, I want's you to specially make out o' that boy the very bestes' man you can with such stuff as you has to work with.

After remembering the absent ones he closed, when all at the table said "Amen!" This was a special Christmas prayer, yet, on all days of the year, Uncle Simon came to the Lord with his cares and joys with the same earnest, childlike faith which his grandchildren brought when they prayed for help in lifting the heavy stump.

This good colored man, whom all the young people called "Uncle Simon," was one of the

most beloved men in all the country around. He was the eldest son of his former owner and master. His half-brothers and sisters, the white Dees, were accustomed to call him brother Simon, which in itself was remarkable.

In their father's will "my son Simon" was remembered, and received as his inheritance three hundred acres of pine land. This gift, which Simon recognized as an honor, had proved the heaviest kind of a burden. He had no ready money

either to clear it or to work it properly where even a few acres had been cleared. Hard-earned cash was needed each year to pay the tax-collector. It took all Uncle Simon could earn by constant



work for small wages at the mill to pay these urgent State dues and provide corn meal for his family. His daughter in the North helped all she could in providing clothing and groceries. His other children were poor, with families of their own, but each of his children or grandchildren would have given up the most valued possession rather than consent to the sale of one acre of the precious land which came from the estate of "ole Mars' Dee," as the old colored man called his own father.

Probably one reason why George and Hervey Dee, his white half-brothers, were always ready to recognize the relationship was because Simon was so generally respected by both white and colored, while at the same time he never presumed upon the fact of kinship. He never forgot to say "Mars' George" and "Mars' Hervey". To this gentle soul every white man of the neighborhood was "mars'," as a matter of habit, and he always addressed them as such; but his children and grandchildren would call no man master. Indeed they had labored in vain to change Simon's habit in this particular. The consequence was that, as far as the white Dees were

concerned, the recognition of kinship stopped with Simon. His children were nothing to them. Lize Jane's mother, who was as high spirited as her Indian grandfather, was a special object of dislike, for when either of her white uncles undertook to order her to do an errand she was quick to reply, "I don't know's I has to mind you. My father's father was just as good as yourn."

About ten o'clock on Christmas morning, Mary Ellen and Madeline came marching up to the kitchen door carrying several small packages of dried fruit and corn, which their mother (Simon's eldest daughter) had sent to her parents as Christmas gifts. These were the best she had to give, for her husband was lazy; then there were three children younger than Madeline. Since breakfast the two girls had walked the seven miles between "Dagget Holler" and their grandfather's home. For months they had been anticipating spending Christmas week at Bigler's Mill.

Mary Ellen, although several shades lighter than her cousin Lize Jane, was decidedly African in feature. Her face was round as a moon and her eyes as full of mischief as her mouth was full of teeth. She was tall and square shouldered, and

was accustomed to carry herself in most independent fashion. She was capable also. "Why, our Mary Ellen can jus' do anything she wants," her comparatively helpless sister Madeline used to say.

"Howd'y' all," said the larger girl as she entered the house and unbuttoned her coat, leaving Madeline to answer questions about the folks at Dagget Holler. Her coat and hat were hardly off, before she took the goose from her grandmother, saying, "Here, you jus' set down an' I'll dress that goose. You has no business to be workin' when you has we all to help you."

"That chile do get more masterful every day!" exclaimed the old woman aside to her husband.

"Jus' leave her 'lone," replied Simon, quietly. "She's worth two o' Lize Jane fo' work."

"Yes, Lize Jane's all fo' books. 'Sides, Mary Ellen's three years oldest."

Si started a fire in the parlor, then the old folks were requested to "go in there an' look your smartest for company." The three girls with Si and Ned had the rest of the house to themselves. Mary Ellen was mistress of ceremonies. She announced, "I takes no foolishness, an' I gives no

foolishness!" but she did her full share of agitating, when the younger ones began to race and chase and joke and giggle. Now and then her broad hand came down in an emphatic slap, when she thought "the pickaninnies" a trifle too familiar with her majesty, in their fun.

Dinner was nearly ready when a one horse rattle-box drove up to the gate. In an instant both front doors were filled with spectators. Not one of the young people shouted a welcome, although it was their favorite "Unc' Bob" who had climbed out of the wagon. A tall, thin female in a cheap calico sun-bonnet, climbed out after him, then took hold of one handle of the small trunk, which Bob had lifted to the ground. In the exertion of carrying her end of the trunk, the bonnet was pushed back, exposing her face, and giving her a peculiar long-headed appearance.

The five young folks giggled and ducked their heads, but made no effort to make the home-coming any easier for Unc' Bob. From the parlor door, good Simon Dee called to the bride and groom, "Jus' bring yo' trunk in here!"

As soon as he could, conveniently, Bob left his wife with her new parents, while he went out

into the kitchen to interview his nephews and nieces. Nobody mentioned the bride until Unc' Bob asked, "Say, youngsters, ain't you all goin' to go in to the parlor an' kiss your Aunt Nancy?"

"Dat ole woman!" cried Mary Ellen, with her chin in the air. "Why, Unc' Bob, she do look ole nuff to be your mother. 'That's a fac'."

"S'pose she is," replied Bob, bravely. "She took that good care o' me 'way down in New O'leans that the doctor say she saved my life. Cou'se I has to marry her by way o' resusitation." But even the long word failed to convince Mary Ellen.

"Here, Si," ordered Mary Ellen, "jus' help me bring in the wash-bench, 'cause the chairs won't go 'round, now we've got so many. Here you Ned, don't stan' there goppin', but jus' go tell gran'motlier that dinner is ready."

Ned turned a somersault of delight. His feet struck the parlor door with force enough to throw it open, then his grandmother showed how spry she was, as she chased that "wiggling and twisting Ned" around the parlor, and over and under the bed. At last she collared him and administered two or three vigorous slaps, while she

exclaimed, "Edward Henry Paul Jackson, I is 'shamed of you. Now, sir, go and kiss your Aunt Nancy at once."

Ned sneaked over and kissed her, for he knew that his grandmother was in no humor for nonsense. He also knew that Mary Ellen and Si were laughing at him, so, as soon as his grandmother's back was turned, the young rogue ventured to make a face at his new aunt.

The bride was indeed old enough to be Bob's mother, but good Simon Dee and his wife treated her as kindly as if she had been the most suitable wife possible for their youngest son. They especially endeavored to be cordial, when they saw that all the children withheld their welcome. Grandmother saw that Mary Ellen was the leader of the plot, so she whispered to their grandfather, "I has gotter straighten that girl out."

"You's got a job," replied Simon, quietly.

Late that afternoon a pony and phaeton stopped at the gate. It was Miss Amanda's own pet pony, while the driver was no other than her brother John. Uncle Simon hurried out to the gate with his cordial, "Howd'y', Mars' John, kin I do anything fo' you?"

"I think not," replied John Carter, "but Aunt Lindy can. May I see her?"

"Certain," replied the old man, turning to call his wife, but she was by that time standing at his side. They soon learned that John's young wife was very ill. The doctor was at the Big House and had expressed a wish for the good nursing of Simon Dee's wife. "He said no one in all this neighborhood could equal you for nursing," said the young man in conclusion.

"Go long with yo', Mister John, you's jus' the same flatterin' as you used to be. Well, I s'pose I has to go if the doctor says so, but these chil-lens will jus' raise the roof 'fore I gets back. If Simon would only give 'em a slap now and then, but they's no use talkin' 'bout that."

"Hurry up, as fast as you can," urged John, who was really impatient to return to his sick wife. However he could not help being amused at "Aunt Lindy," as he called her, for he knew that one word of reproof from Uncle Simon had more weight than half a dozen slaps from his wife's ready hand.

CHAPTER VI

THE FOLKS AT THE BIG HOUSE

LIKE a pair of young lovers, Miss Amanda and Lawyer Gray drove home the "longest way 'round." When they arrived at the Big House they were surprised to see the doctor's carriage there. John came down the steps to meet them and after grasping Lawyer Gray's hand, he exclaimed :

"Oh, Manda, I am so glad you have come. Cora has been suffering horribly for the last two hours. She was ill all night, but would not let me call you, because—well, because she knew how you felt about our being here ; she said she did not want to make you any more trouble. I sent Jim after Dr. Landis. He has been here about twenty minutes ; says he must have Uncle Simon Dee's wife to help him."

"Oh, John," exclaimed Miss Amanda, remorsefully, "I did not know. I did not even guess. Here take the phaeton and go right after Aunt Lindy, while I go up to see if anything is needed

in the sick-room. You will come into the library, please," she said quietly to her friend, who stood at her side wondering what he had better do. Her brother stepped into the house for his hat.

"If I thought I could be of service to you, dear, I would gladly remain, but perhaps I would be in the way more than I could help, so I will ride over as far as the store with John. Then to-morrow morning I will come over to see if I can be of any use. Now good-bye before John comes out."

If her brother's mind had not been full of anxiety he would have noticed the unusual pink on Amanda's cheek and an additional sparkle in her eyes.

"Tell John, if you like," she called, as the two men drove off.

The lawyer was not prepared for the hearty congratulations, nor for John's honest avowal, "You and Mandy ought to have been married long ago. I suppose you would have been happy together these ten years past if I had behaved myself and not left everything on Mandy's shoulders. But it is too late to help that now."

Lawyer Gray made no reply. Indeed, he hardly

knew what to say. The years, although not so happy as they might have been, were by no means lost years to either himself or Amanda, but to her brother they had been worse than wasted. In his heart he pitied him, and blamed the indulgent parents as much as he did the man at his side.

"I should like to get something to do," said John Carter, glancing toward his companion.

"I will keep it in mind," was the lawyer's reply, as he stepped from the phaeton to the platform in front of the store. He smiled as he thought, "this is the first time I ever promised to plead the cause of both plaintiff and defendant."

About eleven o'clock on Christmas night a baby daughter was born to John Carter. A frail little white rosebud, which would require most persistent and tender care, if it ever bloomed into beauty.

"Manda," said John, as he stood looking at the frail little mortal which enclosed a spark of immortality, "I shall name the baby Olive, after my mother. My poor mother," he added with a sigh. For the first his sister's heart began to relent toward him, as she thought, "perhaps he really is going to be a better man. He does seem

to care for his young wife." When she took the baby back to the bed she stooped and kissed the white face of the young mother, who smiled feebly and whispered, "Thank you."

Tears came to Miss Amanda's eyes. "To think," said she to herself, "that young thing thanked me for a kiss of welcome which has been withheld for over a week." The good woman was blessed with two persistent, uncomfortable companions—one was a keen sense of justice,



the other a tender conscience. Justice urged that her brother and his wife had no right to remain in her house a moment, unless she invited them; while conscience would not consent to their being sent away until some other home was provided for them.

Uncle Simon Dee's wife had been frequently

called to the Big House ; for John's mother was one of Simon's white half-sisters, and during the years of trial, after her son ran away, she used to find comfort in talking to Simon, whose simple, earnest faith was indeed a help and support. It did not surprise Miss Amanda, therefore, when, the Sunday morning after little Olive was born, Aunt Lindy said to her, "Miss Mandy, I wants to talk with you 'lone somewhere."

The door of the sitting room was hardly closed before the colored woman began. "Miss Mandy, I reckons Mister John's going to do better. He done told his wife this morning that if he could get anything to do he would take her and the baby into a little one-roomed cabin. That young thing tole him gentle-like, fo' she's mighty weak yet, 'That would be so nice, dear John.' "

"But what could John do?" inquired his sister.

"I spoke to his Uncle Simon 'bout that," replied Aunt Lindy, proudly, "an' he do say he thinks Mister John could manage a farm fust-rate. He say that 'fore John got so wild like, your pa uster teach him how to do things 'bout the place. Don't you remember how he uster order the darkies around so masterful, when he was only a

little chap? He always had the flatterin'est way, an' no one ever got mad at Mister John."

Miss Amanda sighed, as she thought of the light-hearted, spoiled boy of the past, and the heavy-hearted ruined man of the present. Would the good that was in him reassert itself, or rather would he be willing to turn from his evils ways and live?

Monday morning John Carter called at the grist mill to see Uncle Simon. While there he asked whether another hand was needed at the mill. This gave Simon a chance to talk to the young man about himself and his future. John was pleased to hear the old man say that he did not doubt his ability to do well as an overseer of a farm or even a plantation.

"But, Mars' John," said Uncle Simon, earnestly, "you's been havin' a heap of trouble all these years tryin' to take care of yo'self. An' ain't it 'bout time you let the dear Lord help yo'? I promised your po' sick ma that if her boy come back I would try to help him start right, an' you jus' can't start right 'thout you get the good Lord to take holt yo' hand."

"I know you're right, Uncle Simon. But the

Lord does not want to take hold of my hand, when for thirty years I would not let him lead me."

"Mars' John," said the old man, solemnly, "don't you let the devil fool you with that kind o' talk. Why, I b'lieves the Good Master jus' brought you back to Bigler's Mill to answer yo' po' ma's prayers. Mars' John, won't you please come up into the grain lof' with me, where we won't be int'rupted?"

John Carter knew what this request meant. More than one poor sinner, white and colored, had gone with Uncle Simon to the grain loft, that the good old man might pray for him. More than one soul had been born anew in that dusty chamber of the old mill. It was in truth a prophet's chamber, for here Uncle Simon often came, "between grists," and held converse with the Lord of the whole earth.

Here and there, among all people, white and black, there are a few shining examples of what the word Christian means. Uncle Simon was one of these. No one in all the land could have talked as plainly or prayed as earnestly with John Carter as this faithful old colored man, because the young

man knew him to be just what he professed to be, a follower of the meek and lowly Jesus.

The world looked brighter to John that day as he left the old mill. He had not yet found any work for his hands to do, but he felt that in him a work was being done, which made his heart lighter, his hope purer, his aims less selfish.

CHAPTER VII

ON EARTH PEACE, GOOD WILL TOWARD MEN

“**Y**OU'RE just company, an' you needn't think you can boss we all, if gran'mother is away,” exclaimed Si, for Mary Ellen's airs were growing tiresome.

“Oh, yes,” replied the girl, with a toss of her head, “you an' Lize Jane'd like to run this house your own selves; but I wants you children to understand that I's the lady of the house.”

“Pretty lady?” questioned Si, with a sniff.

“You needn't stick up your pinched Jew nose at me,” cried Mary Ellen, angrily. The young folks were having things pretty much their own way, for their grandfather and Uncle Bob were out of the house a great deal, and their new aunt did not like to interfere in their disagreements, fearing that it would only make them angry with her, without accomplishing the wished-for result. Si was hot tempered; Mary Ellen tantalizing; Lize Jane anxious to read, but not eager for housework; Madeline stupid; and Ned active, bright,

and mischievous. Five such young humans shut in together are like five opposing chemicals enclosed in a retort, you can expect some lively action among the atoms.

"Jew nose, indeed," replied Si, as he tenderly stroked the slandered feature. "S'pose I tell you how you come to be such a flat-nosed African, an' I has such a proper-looking smeller. Well, when I was a baby all the white folks come to see me, an' they say, 'Oh, what a pretty baby.' " Si passed his thumb and finger down his nose, in imitation of the gentle pinch which the white visitors gave that organ in order to shape it properly. "But when you was a baby every person what come to see you was colored, an' they say, 'Laws, what a likely chile,'" whereupon the mischievous boy



passed his open hand flat down over Mary Ellen's face, to illustrate how her colored guests had assisted in the flattening process.

The girl's hand was ready and came down with a whack upon Si's shoulder.

Nancy thought it was high time to interfere, so she called to Lize Jane, who was only an interested onlooker of the quarrel, and said to her, "I'd like to gib yo' young folks a Christmas-week treat. If you all 'll take dis dime an' sen' to de store fo' some 'lasses, I'll make you jes' de bestes' candy yo' ebber sot yo' teeth unto."

"My, how niggery she do talk," exclaimed Mary Ellen aside; but she was unpopular at that moment, and the majority went over to the enemy.

Ned forgot his grievances and danced a jig, while he offered to "cut sticks for the 'lasses," which was his way of saying he would run like a race-horse.

While making and pulling the candy, Bob's wife tried in every way to show the young folks that she really wanted them to care for her, and, which was even more effective, that she cared for them.

Ned was naturally a loving little rogue, and her kindness and candy won him. He stood at her

side helping to pick out hickory nuts, which Si and Lize Jane were cracking on the rough stone hearth. "Did you know we call you Mammy Nance?" inquired the boy, by way of continuing the conversation between himself and his new aunt. Si nudged his cousin and almost made her crack her finger, while Madeline rolled her eyes and thought, "Now we all are going to catch it, for Ned's mouth." They were all taken by surprise when their Unc' Bob's wife replied, pleasantly:

"Mammy Nance is a mighty nice name, fo' dar is nothin' I likes to do 's well as motherin'."

Thus it came to pass that the name which Si had given to her in ridicule, because she took such motherly care of her young husband, at length became her pet name with the young people. The childless old woman soon made for herself a pleasant and necessary place in Simon Dee's home. Gradually, as the nephews and nieces learned to appreciate the kindness of her heart, they gave her their cordial approval.

Each morning the two boys drove the old mule, with the cart, away over to the railway station to see whether the package had come from the

North. At last, on the Monday after Christmas, just as their grandfather was sitting down to his dinner, the boys drove up to the gate with a shout which informed everybody in the cabin that the wished-for had come.

"It's a box as big as a house," shouted Si.

"How would you like to live in it?" questioned his grandfather, as a gentle rebuke for the boy's exaggeration.

"'Twas a henhouse I meant," was his quick reply. "But deed an' double, grandfather, it's the biggest box what Aunt Sally ever sent. I wonder can we get it through the door?" This was indeed a question, so they decided to open it just in front of the doorstep.

A "grab-bag" and "surprise party" combined would not have given them as great delight as the emptying of that box. Even their grandfather became quite excited when the groceries were unpacked, for it seemed as though nothing had been forgotten. Ned fairly wriggled into the middle of things. He crawled under some one's arm here, then seeing something more interesting in another direction, he dived over there.

"Look ahere!" "D'yo' see this?" "My, ain't

that splendiferous!" resounded on all sides, as different articles were brought to light. "Oh, here's a big kettle for gran'mother," cried Ned, working his way down to the bottom of the box. The kettle was fished out. Under the heavy tin cover reposed a pretty hat for Lize Jane, while under the hat was a letter to her from her mother, which the girl tucked into her pocket, to read when the wonderful box was emptied.

No member of the family had been slighted. The boys had good, warm, partly worn clothing, besides new neckties, shoes, and stockings. Their grandmother would find upon her return from the Big House, plenty of woollen cloth for a new dress, also a warm, brown hood. For Uncle Simon there was a good Sunday suit, which he examined carefully, piece by piece, then exclaimed :

"Well, I do say, if Sally's Mars' Mix ever wore them clothes he jus' must have stood up in 'em, the whole time he wore 'em. Why, I can wear 'em fo' years an' years."

The one that fared the best of all was Lize Jane. She piled her belongings on the spare bed in the parlor; then, when she had seen the bottom of the box, she went in to take account of

her own private stock. There were four more books for her library, from the young lady up North, who also loved to read. There were two new calico dresses, besides a dark-blue serge, which the happy girl declared was the nicest dress she ever owned.

"Why, gal," cried Mary Ellen, surveying the pile of things belonging to her cousin, "looks like you're going to be married."

"I aint thinkin' 'bout such foolishness," replied Lize Jane. "But it do seem as though Mammy Sally has made some mistake to send me so much."

"See what she says about it in her letter," suggested Si.

She had not read the first page before she astonished them all by bursting into tears.

"Never mind, Lize Jane," whispered Ned, cuddling up to his sister, "you shall wear my new overcoat," whereupon she put her arms around Ned and cried the harder.

"What is it, chile?" questioned her grandfather. "Is your mammy sick?"

"Oh, it's too good; it's too good. I can't believe it," cried the girl; "but mammy says some

good Christian ladies up there are going to join together and send me to the seminary to school." She took up the letter and finished it, then told her interested listeners that the kind ladies had helped her mother to get her clothes ready so that she could begin school January sixth, when the next term would open.

"Come, chillen," said Uncle Simon, seating himself at the table to finish his interrupted meal, "we has to give thanks again fo' these unexpected mercies."

Lize Jane's tears flowed afresh, as her grandfather told the Lord all about "this poor chile, what is so glad that she can't 'spress herself. Help her to get all the learnin' her head 'll hold, an' when it do get full, O Lord, jus' show her how little she know's 'longside o' you. 'Then help her to give it all up to you, and herself 'long with it, so's she can work for you to the best of her know how. Bless those good, kind ladies up North. P'rhaps they don't sense what they's adoin', but ev'y stroke of work what Lize Jane does better fo' you, 'cause she's got learnin', they'll know and 'jice about up yonder, when we meet with them and many happy, saved sin-

ners 'round the throne." "Amen," responded the grandchildren earnestly. Then all began to talk together about the marvelous change in Lize Jane's future.

That afternoon the young folks all walked over to the Big House to tell the news to their grandmother, and, if possible, to see the baby. They found the house in apple-pie order for Miss Amanda's wedding on the morrow. That good lady herself was in the sitting room talking to Lawyer Gray, when Aunt Becky started up the stairs to tell their grandmother that the young folks had come to see her.

"What is wanted?" inquired the lady of the house as she came out into the hall. Aunt Lindy was carrying the precious baby, and explained that she was going to show it to the children from her home.

"Oh, yes; that reminds me," said Miss Amanda, "I want Uncle Simon to come over and see me married, and the rest of your folks might as well come too."

"Did you ever know so many good times to come to once?" cried Lize Jane, when she heard this invitation.

Long before noon, the hour appointed for the wedding, Uncle Simon's grandchildren were at the Big House.

"Land sakes, chillern, why didn't you all come 'fore breakfast?" was their grandmother's sarcastic greeting. "Well, now you are here jus' make yo'selves mighty small so's you won't be in the way."

Uncle Simon said he would come over along about time for the ceremony. As Nancy was a stranger, she did not consider herself included in the general invitation, so she and Bob were to remain at home.

Her brother's wife was still too ill to permit Miss Amanda to really invite any guests. A few of her friends has been informally told of the hour when Preacher Garland would be at the Big House, so that when the brlde and bridegroom entered the parlor they found witnesses in plenty. The house servants and Simon Dee's grandchildren stood in the doorways, but Uncle Simon and Aunt Lindy, by special request, were stationed not far from the bridal pair. In her motherly arms Aunt Lindy held the tiny babe, all dressed in long white robes, for the young mother had

expressed the wish that her little Olive might be one of the guests.

After the brief, but solemn ceremony was ended, and the husband and wife were congratulated by their white friends, Uncle Simon came forward to offer his blessing.

"Mars' and Mrs. Gray," he began, with dignity, "'tis good for us to be here. May the Lord bless you, an' make your faces shine with the light of joy from inside. He has set your feet in a large room, like he did King David, so he wants you to have large hands, an' big brains, an' large hearts. Then he'll give you large blessin's."

"Dat's every word so, honey," responded Aunt Lindy.

"I am sure you are right, Uncle Simon," replied Mrs. Amanda, cordially. "When we are so happy ourselves we ought to try and make others happy. I am going to begin by seeing that everybody has a good dinner."

The bride was once again the energetic house-keeper, moving happily among her guests, inviting them to the dinner which had been prepared with the usual Southern hospitality. Two tables had been spread. The food was delicious and

abundant at each table, but she concluded that her guests in the kitchen were really having the happier time.

When the friends were quietly taking their departure, Lawyer Gray told Uncle Simon that Amanda wished to see him as soon as the others had gone. The good old colored man stood in the hall waiting until Mrs. Gray was at leisure.

"Uncle Simon," said the lady of the house, as she came to him, "I thought you would be glad to know that brother John is going to take charge of my husband's farm, and he and his young wife, when she is really well enough, are going to live in the old home of the Grays. Of course I could not leave the Big House to go with Samuel to his, so that fixes us happily all around."

"I know I don't deserve this," said John, turning suddenly on his heel and facing Uncle Simon. "But Amanda and her husband insist upon it that I can do it, so I am going to try."

"Course you can do it, chile," said the fatherly old man. "It's the bestes' that could happen."

"But remember, John," said his sister, warmly, "Cora and the baby cannot leave here until sister is strong enough to take charge of a house. So I

think you might as well make up your mind to stay here until spring.

"'Manda," said John, with trembling voice, "this is like the song the angels sang of peace and good-will."

"Yes, brother," replied his sister, her voice tremulous with tears, "it took us a long time to catch the tune, yet I am glad we can sing it now, on this the beginning of our new life, and the last day of Christmas week."







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